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# ART STRIKE 1990- 1993

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WE CALL ON ALL CULTURAL  
WORKERS TO PUT DOWN  
THEIR TOOLS AND CEASE TO  
MAKE, DISTRIBUTE, SELL,  
EXHIBIT, OR DISCUSS THEIR  
WORK FROM 1 JANUARY 1990  
TO 1 JANUARY 1993. WE CALL  
FOR ALL GALLERIES,  
MUSEUMS, AGENCIES,  
'ALTERNATIVE' SPACES,  
PERIODICALS, THEATERS,  
ART SCHOOLS ETC., TO  
CEASE ALL OPERATIONS FOR  
THE SAME PERIOD.

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For the true and living equality we will give up everything. Let the arts perish if need be! But let us have real equality.

(Sylvain Maréchal, *Manifeste des Égaux*, published by the *Tribun du Peuple*, 1796, France)

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...“Art will no longer have a name; the notion of art will undergo a revolution, and not by art, which from no longer being named will live healthily again”...

(Jean Dubuffet, *Asphyxiant Culture*, published by J.J. Pauvert, 1968, France)

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The occupations for all their chaos were an attack on the commodity form (even if this was still understood crudely and ‘sociologically’ as an attack on ‘consumer society’). Art was also put down pretty heavily though few people actually realised that they had reached the stage where the abolition of art had become the next

logical thing to do.

(First published in, *LS. #12*, 1969, reprinted in Christopher Gray’s, *Leaving the 20th Century*, Free Fall Publications, 1974, UK)

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The primary function of the “abolition of art” is to destroy all the cultural mythologies whereby the powers-that-be crystallize the image of their superiority, their own intelligence; art is the armchair in which the State sits for its own pleasure.

Now, it is quite clear that the difference between the *Abolition of Art* and all the previous attempts at ideological destruction (Dada in particular) is that I consciously and deliberately allied the elimination of esthetic values to the necessity and possibility of social revolution.

Let us have no illusions about it: most

After three years  
of growing turmoil  
'it had to come'



"art critics" are going to carry on as if art were not abolished, as if art couldn't be abolished; most "artists" are going to continue to believe in the "artistic" character of their production; most gallery-goers, art lovers and, of course buyers are going to ignore the fact that the abolition of art can really occur in the actual time and space of a pre-revolutionary situation like that of May 1968. It is essential that the minority advocate the necessity of going on an active art strike, using the "machines" of the culture industry so that we can more effectively set it in total contradiction with itself. The intention is not to end the rule of production, but to change the most adventurous part of "artistic" production into the production of revolutionary ideas, forms and techniques.

(Alain Jouffroy, 'What's to be done about

art?, published in, *Art and Confrontation*,  
New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1968, USA)

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*When I asked Duchamp how he spent his time now that he had given up making art, he said he was just "a breather." "I am one of the lazier," he told me. "I don't see why one should have to work, do you?"*

(Calvin Tomkins, *Post-Modern*, Penguin, New York, 1988, USA)

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When the PRAXIS group declared their intention to organize an Art Strike for the three year period 1990-1993, they fully intended that this proposed inaction should create at least as many problems as it resolved.

The importance of the Art Strike lies not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war. The Art Strike addresses a series of issues: most important amongst these is the fact that the socially imposed hierarchy of the arts can be

actively and aggressively challenged. Simply making this challenge goes a considerable way towards dismantling the mental set art and undermining its hegemonic position within contemporary culture, since the success of art as a supposedly 'superior form of knowledge' is largely dependent upon its status remaining unquestioned.

Other issues with which the Art Strike is concerned include that series of 'problems' centered on the question of 'identity.' By focusing attention on the identity of the artist, and the social and administrative practices an individual must pass through before such an identity becomes generally recognized, the organizers of the Art Strike intend to demonstrate that within this society there is a general drift away from the pleasures of play and simulation; a drift which leads, via codification, on into the prison of the 'real.'

(Stewart Home, *Art Strike 1990-1993*, 1989, UK)

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**THERE IS ONLY ONE SOLUTION.**

WE MUST LIQUIDATE THIS CRAZY  
THING CALLED ART TO MAKE IT  
POSSIBLE FOR ALL PEOPLE EV-  
ERYWHERE TO BE CREATIVE. IT IS  
OUR DUTY AS ARTISTS TO  
BECOME SELF-DESTRUCTIVE IN A  
CONSTRUCTIVE WAY.

WE MUST LIQUIDATE NOT ONLY  
OUR OWN FUNCTION AS ARTISTS  
BUT WE MUST LIQUIDATE THE  
ART SYSTEM AS WELL.

ALL ARTISTS WHO CONTINUE TO  
WORK WITH THE SYSTEM WILL BE  
REQUIRED TO PRODUCE NOTHING  
BUT MINIATURES IN ORDER TO  
LIMIT THE GROWING ART POLLU-  
TION. THOSE WHO DESIRE MAY  
ALSO BE PERMITTED TO MAKE  
ARTISTIC PAINTINGS ON BOMBS

BEFORE THEY ARE DROPPED ON  
PEOPLE.

*(International Society for the Liquidation of Art, 1970,  
USA)*

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The architects of the Art Strike want to  
force everyone else to emulate their own  
lack of success. They're promoting lazy  
cate Intelllectualism as a political ideal.

*(Julian Schabel, 1989, USA)*

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Artists engaged in political struggle act  
in two key areas: the use of their art for  
direct social change; and actions to  
change the structures of the art world. It  
needs to be understood that this activity  
is necessarily of a reformist, rather than  
revolutionary, character. Indeed this po-  
litical activity often serves to consolidate  
the existing order, in the West, as well as  
in the East.

Throughout the century, artists have at-

tacked the prevailing methods of production, distribution and consumption of art. These attacks on the organization of the art world have gained momentum in recent years. This struggle, aimed at the destruction of existing commercial and public marketing and patronage systems, can be brought to a successful conclusion in the course of the present decade.

The refusal of labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years - 1977 to 1980 - when artists will not produce work, see work, permit work to go on exhibition, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art world. This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the

It's Inevitable

1990-1993

the years without art



One Step Beyond Commodity Culture

state.

Three years is the minimum period required to cripple the system, whilst a longer period of time would create difficulties for artists. The very small number of artists who live from the practice of art are sufficiently wealthy to live on their capital for three years. The vast majority of people who produce art have to subsidize this work by other means: they will, in fact, be saving money and time. Most people who practice art never sell their work at a profit, do not get the chance to exhibit their work under proper conditions, and are unmentioned by the publicity organs. Some artists may find it difficult to restrain themselves from producing art. These artists will be invited to enter camps, where the making of art works is forbidden, and where any

work produced is destroyed at regular intervals.

In place of the practice of art, people can spend time on the numerous historical, aesthetic and social issues facing art. It will be necessary to construct more equitable forms for marketing, exhibiting and publicizing art in the future. As the twentieth century has progressed, capitalism has smothered art - the deep surgery of the years without art will give art a new chance.

(Gustav Metzger, *Art into Society - Society into Art*, (catalogue), ICA, London, 1974, UK)

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...The protest itself was a failure: Metzger was the only artist to strike and the art world, contrary to Metzger's wishes did not collapse. However, the exercise bore more than a bitter fruit, because by refusing to produce art, Metzger was refusing the role of an artist. This



single gesture demonstrated the fallacy of popular ideas about artists as individuals possessed by an uncontrollable creative urge. It also showed that it was possible to break with the privileged position certain militants have come to occupy within capitalist society. Metzger realized what Vaneigem and various other spectro-scientologists could only partially theorize - the rejection of roles - and for this alone he will not be forgotten.

(Stewart Home, published in, *The Assault on Culture*, by S. Home, Aporia & Unpopular Books, London, 1988, UK)

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In 1985, when the PRAXIS group declared their intention to organize an Art Strike for the period of 1990-1993, it resolved the question of what members of this group should do with their time for the five year period leading up to the strike. This period has been characterized by an ongoing struggle against the received culture of the reigning society (and has been physically manifested in the adoption of multiple iden-

ties such as Karen Elliot and the organization of events such as the Festival of Plagiarism). What the organization of the Art Strike left unresolved was how members of PRAXIS and their supporters should see their time over the period of the strike. Thus, the strike has been positioned in clear opposition to closure - for every 'problem' it has 'resolved,' at least one new 'problem' has been 'created.'

(Stewart Home, *Art Strikes*, published in, *Plagiarism*, edited by S. Home, Aporia Press, London, 1987, UK)

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The whole point is that life during the strike is going to be more creative, not less.

(Spalding Gray, 1989, USA)

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It is not a matter of realizing the Art Strike, or even building on every level of life everything that hitherto could only be an art strike memory, or an illusion, dreamed and preserved unilaterally. The Art Strike can only be realized by being suppressed. And in suppressing it with the automatism of an

even more passive and hierarchical spectacle, we freeze dry its contents into something stable, quantifiable, investment worthy, in short homogenous.

The Art Strike is not only a commodity but also a symbolic representation of this order, the justification of its concept of reality.

There will be an empty space left by the Art Strike as a comprehensive order binding everything, the social consensus will be destroyed, we will have reached the end of the great history of our common culture. The empty space left by the Art Strike will be occupied by another order, the economy. The ideal of change as value, adopted by our culture, has found its full significance in the Art Strike.

The Art Strike in its honesty, says about itself that in its state of exhaustion it is not able to put forward values. It can only be a description of a situation, the world of

exhausted values of our culture. It can only be a quotation of history, a substitute for something that has ceased to exist.

The Art Strike opposes the logical way of mind which has led to this cultural devastation. The Art Strike will be a resounding stroke of the gong, its ringing will drown out the squawks of the malingersers, their strained voices will fade into thin air.

To speak of the Art Strike means to speak of the unknown, to speak of a door to a new world, to speak of a desire to discover what one does not know. For how can one know a desire without satisfying it?

(Art Strike Action Committee (CA), 1988, USA)

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Capitalism has turned not only art but our bodies into commodities. The only real originality of the '80s is that our bodies and lives are all that there's left to consume.

(Gary Indiana, Escape from New York, article published in, San Francisco Sentinel, Feb. 1988, USA)

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The art business, like any business, is full of phonies, pimps, and gamblers. All that vision and talent shit is just advertising.  
(LaRoy Roman, 1989, USA)

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During martial law in Poland, artists refused to exhibit their work in state galleries, leaving the ruling elite without an official culture. For months the art galleries were empty. Eventually some mediocre artists were discovered, who were prepared to take advantage of this situation, and their work was shown. The Polish intelligentsia immediately organized an effective boycott of openings, denying the art an audience and the bureaucracy any credibility.

(Stewart Home, Art Strike, published in, Plagiarism, edited by S. Home, Aporia Press, London, 1987, UK)

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## How Does One Become an Artist?

One becomes an artist the same way one becomes an engineer, scientist, policeman, army officer, journalist, economist, manager, politician, lawyer. You simply obtain your degree at a university where you have learned the skills of your field - just like any other aspiring professional.

(Miklos Haraszti, (unofficially published in Hungary, 1986), Noonday Press, New York, 1989, USA)

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*STEP UP The Art Strike.* By definition its decentralizing/anti-authoritative. Designed to stop production and provoke discussion of and about art and the very limiting contexts in which art is defined and allowed to evolve and how that effectively determines and controls the lives of artists.

**PATRONAGE  
EXCLUSION  
CAREERISM  
ALIENATION  
IMPOTENCE**

*STRIKE  
OUT  
BEFORE  
YOU'RE  
STRUCK  
OUT*

*STEP 2 Society has developed an intriguing approach to living which has provided educational facilities, hospitals, prisons and factory farms, all with surprisingly similar structures and functions, with some discernable differences in comfort and privilege.*

*STEP 3 Rebellion is encouraged. There is no movement of information in static systems and information always moves towards the dominant system.*

*STEP 4 It always pays to fund the opposition. A potential threat is diffused through definition, duplication and dependence. A new market information for saturation and eventual consumption of the mutation.*

*(Ad Agency, excerpt from pamphlet published on the occasion of a symposium titled, Art Strike 1990-1993, held at the San Francisco Art Institute, March, 1988, USA)*

**Destroy  
this Artwork**



**during the  
Art Strike 1990-93**

**Preserve  
this Artwork**



**during the  
Art Strike 1990-93**

**Art Strike interview with Karen  
Ellot, interviewed by Scott  
MacLeod, 1988.**

**SM:** Tell me about the Art Strike.

**KE:** The premise is that an Art Strike should be held from Jan. 1st 1990 to January 1st 1993. The strike will force the closure of galleries, 'modern' art museum, agencies, 'alternative' art spaces, periodicals, theaters, art schools, etc. All the educational, distributional and critical mechanisms by which art both as an ideology and as a commodity is propagated.

**SM:** It must be hard to convince artists or anyone else that going on strike is a good idea.

**KE:** Well, the Art Strike is not a good idea. It's a bad idea from the point of

view of anyone trying to make a career out of art. It's a bad idea from many perspectives, and that does make things a bit more difficult; even though our aims in organizing an Art Strike are completely different from Metzger's. We're addressing a far broader range of issues than Metzger and unlike him we don't necessarily expect the mechanics of a strike to operate in the same way within the realm of culture as they would in the economic sphere. Rather than attempting to disrupt and destroy those institutions which effect production and distribution of art products, the Art Strike is principally focused on the role of the artist. On how the artist defines her or his identity, on how that identity affects the artist's ability to engage with the surrounding culture.

SM: So, the Art Strike is a bad idea and it's not really what it says it is, it's not

really a strike against the gallery system or the commodity system.

KE: We've had endless discussions about the appropriateness of the term 'strike,' about its efficacy in this situation. At one time we tried to change the name to 'Refusal of Creativity' but this phrase just didn't catch on. We found that people responded to the term 'Art Strike' because its confrontational and brings together ideas from what are traditionally considered to be two autonomous realms - the economic and cultural. In the syndicalist tradition, which has had an influence on our thinking, the strike is ultimately the means of revolution - far more is at issue than a simple hourly-wage increase.

As far as we're concerned, the Art Strike is a strike. It's a denial of product and a

denial of labor. Like the syndicalist general strike, the issues being discussed range from the economic to those of revolution and self-determination. We're trying to achieve large-scale change in our relationships with what the bourgeois art establishment alleges are 'aesthetic' objects and relationships. We decided to describe our activities as a strike in order to make our political, economic and moral motivations explicit. And we hope the use of this term will encourage active rather than passive engagement with the issues.

(Scott MacLeod, (excerpts of interview) first published in, Shift, Vol. 2, #4, San Francisco, 1988, USA)

ATA Gallery hosted the Art Strike Mobilization Week January 3-8 with a variety of events: discussion, performance, propaganda-making, dialogue, testimonial, poetry, direct action, etc.. Art Scribe, as a polemic, proposes artists giving up making art for three years, (1990-

1993, The Years Without Art).....which is all very nice. But what went on at ATA this past week could more honestly be called a dialogue about aesthetics, or a week long performance piece, than a direct political action. Then again, that's part of the question the strike ultimately raises: what's the difference? And what is Art Scribe...

(Rachel Kaplan, excerpts from review titled, Adding More Fuel to the Art Strike Fire, in, Coming Up, Vol. 10, #4, Jan. 1989, San Francisco, USA)

Ultimately the art strike is an end, a schism, perhaps the beginning of another life.  
(Janet Janet, 1989, USA)

**AFTER DEC. 31ST OF THIS YEAR,  
THERE WON'T BE ANYMORE  
POETRY READINGS. NOBODY  
WILL WRITE POETRY. NOBODY  
WILL PRINT PICTURES OR MAKE  
ART VIDEOS. NO DANCE PER-  
FORMANCES WILL BE HELD, NO**



ONE WILL MINGLE AT ART OPENINGS. GALLERIES WILL CLOSE OR BE CONVERTED TO OTHER USES. A GREAT CALMNESS WILL SETTLE OVER THE WORLD. FORMER ARTISTS WILL HAVE MORE TIME TO COOK, CORRESPOND. CREATIVITY, FREED OF TRADITIONAL CONSTRAINTS, WILL BE CHANNELLED INTO RELATIONSHIPS, WORK ENVIRONMENTS, COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES. PEOPLE WHO NEVER THOUGHT OF THEMSELVES AS CREATIVE WILL NO LONGER BE INTIMIDATED BY TALENTED BULLIES. LIFE WILL BECOME INCREASINGLY DELIGHTFUL AND UNPREDICTABLE. THE RICH WILL

HAVE ONLY THE ART OBJECTS OF THE PAST TO SIGNIFY THEIR CULTURAL SUPERIORITY, AND THEIR SENSE OF STATUS WILL GROW MORE DESPERATE AND IRONIC WITH EACH PASSING DAY.

ART STRIKE: OUT OF CULTURE AND INTO THE WORLD.

(Art Strike Action Committee (CA), 1989, USA)

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Imagine a world in which art is forbidden! Art galleries would close. Books would vanish. Pop stars would shed their glamor overnight. Advertising would cease, television would die. We could refocus our vision not on a succession of false images but on the world as it is. A stillness would



## ART STRIKE

1990-1993

fill the air. Art has provided us with fantasy worlds, escapes from reality. For whatever it is, art is not reality. Soap operas, novels, movies; concerts, the theater, poetry. None of these are real as a starving child is real, as a town without water is real. Art is the glamorous escape, the transformation that shields us from the world we live in. Injustice, endemic disease, famine, war. Those are real. Art has replaced religion as the opiate of the people just as the artist has replaced the priest as the spokesperson of the spirit. Once people reached inside themselves to find God. Now they find art. We are regulated by our addictions and art has become an addiction. We struggle through life in a drugged dream, searching for escape,

for brighter fantasies, longer voyages of the imagination, louder music. Another person's life is always more interesting than our own. It is only those who have given up art who can experience the true nature of creation. Now, a self-perpetuating elite, market art as a commodity for the wealthy who have everything while making artists themselves rich beyond their wildest dreams. Art is money. It is ironic that the myth of the artist celebrates suffering while it is those who have never heard of art, the poor and wretched of the earth, who truly suffer. To call one person an artist is to deny another the equal gift of vision. Paint all the paintings black and celebrate the dead art: there is no booze in hell. We turn away from moun-

# FOUR BILLION PEOPLE CAN'T BE WRONG

tains of food that rot in storage while across the globe people grow too weak to eat because it is time for our favorite TV programme. We live up to our knees in blood, wasting not only hours but days - whole lifetimes - in the blind belief that art is good, art is pure, art is its own justification - and a nightmare scourges our planet. Until we end famine there will be no peace. Artists are murderers! Artists are murderers just as surely as is the soldier who sights down the barrel of a gun to shoot an unarmed civilian. Without art, life would be unendurable! We would have to transform this world. Overnight, one person's dream can become a nation's future - but we do not seize power because we are enchanted by art. Forbid art and

revolution would follow: the withholding of creative action is the only weapon left to people. Seeing and creating are the same activity. Those who create art are also creating the starving. In a world in which art is forbidden the deserts would flower. Give up art. Save the starving.

(Tony Lewis, Art Strike Action Committee  
(Southwest Eire), Republic of Ireland)

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## 20

OF THE MOST DIFFICULT,  
AWKWARD & SEARCHING  
QUESTIONS YOU COULD  
ASK ABOUT THE ART

# STRIKE 1990-1993

## 1. What is the Art Strike?

Art Strike is the total withdrawal of all cultural production for a period of 3 years (1990-1993). All artists will cease to distribute, sell, exhibit, or discuss their work between Jan. 1st, 1990 - Jan. 1st, 1993.

## 2. What art will be struck?

Art Strike is an assault upon all cultural activity within the modernist & post-modernist traditions.

## 3. Strike for what?

To dismantle the cultural apparatus.

## 4. Is this a joke?

Absolutely not. How can you have shows when some people don't even have shoes?

## 5. What is the Art Strike?

Art Strike is the rough undressing of

creativity. What an artist considers to be his/her identity is nothing but a divisive set of schooled, snotty attitudes.

## 6. What's wrong with being an artist?

To call one person an artist is to deny another the equal gift of vision.

## 7. What will I be if I'm not an artist?

Think of how many people have gotten laid without even talking about art.

## 8. What's wrong with making art?

We're living in an isolation tank, only instead of warm water we're bathing in bullshit. Within the information economy, opposition speeds the flow, each statement creates its own negation, context shifts constantly, and the only principle that emerges from the din is the principle of the flux itself, consumption.

9. What is the Art Strike?

Silence.

10. What do you expect to accomplish?

We will step outside of history.

11. Why should I go on strike?

Self-interest.

12. Is this a joke?

Sure; a joke, a fraud, the worst idea ever.

13. What is the Art Strike?

In its origins, just another cocky whiteboy spectacle. Now, however, girls are playing too.

14. What's in it for you?

We hope to promote our own careers. Of course, only the Strike's failure would accomplish this, so you can't get out of it that way.

15. Why do so many people hate this idea?

Because they stand to lose every-

thing they don't have and wouldn't deserve even if they did have.

16. Will sex be better in the years without art?

It goes without saying.

17. What is the Art Strike?

Art Strike is the ceremonial mask of a movement away from competitive art making and toward a culture without curators.

18. Who's behind it?

Better a thousand movements fail than one leader succeeds. Anyone can organize the Art Strike, many have.

19. Why 3 years?

In the first year the world will be a field of undifferentiated experience. In the second year shapes will emerge from a background. In the third year new perceptual methods will arise.

## 20. Why must we stop making art?

Because the refusal of artistic identity is the only weapon left to us and the demolition of serious culture the only way ahead.

(Art Strike Action Committee (CA), San Francisco, 1989, USA)

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Congratulations for furthering the cause of capitalism! The drive of advanced capital proletarianizes the primitive capitalist. The Luddites broke machines because they did not want to become wage-laborers, wage-labor only for all artists! Up the rich! All artists to the sweatshops! Let an worker own his own production.

(C.A., 1989, USA)

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Thank you so much for sending materials, I was so delighted. Yes, I have been on strike for quite some time. It began with my arrest at Diablo in 1981 - so now I am afraid I am an activist for life.

Please send further propaganda, and send my friends some more of the same.

Thanks, what can I say, I think this is a swell idea. I have been thoroughly annoyed at artists, some friends, some not, who look down their noses at me for not being productive. The irony is, I was better than them, and they've never been activists. I opted to pump out anti-nuclear material. I have also been a celibate for ten years - so you can see my strike stance has been pretty extreme. It's not easy finding men who are feminist and don't buy into the system.

(G.W., 1989, USA)

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## A Sentence for the Culture Industry

We cannot get out of your shadow and we know that; and we know that we love the shadow pleasures of your dominion - not the way you do, taking your own products as omens of liberty, but loving helplessly, entranced, loving the levers of your control; also, we know that we are the same as you because



# ART STRIKE

## 1990-1993

The deep surgery of the years without art!



we are of you, born of your rib, inconceivable without you, that is, we know that we are corrupt, paranoid, and parasitic; and finally we know that we want more than anything else to oppose you and that is why we are creating this conceptual suicide, this passionate act of love.

(Dolores Hanks & Aaron Noble, 1989, USA)

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## ART STRIKE ACTION COMMITTEE (ASAC) CONTACTS:

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ASAC (California), PO Box 170715, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA

ASAC (Eastern USA), PO Box 22142, Baltimore, MD 21203, USA

ASAC (UK), BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, England

ASAC (Ireland), c/o Tony Lewes, Aillihies, Bantry, West Cork, Republic of Ireland



ASAC (Latin America), C. de Correos  
1211, Montevideo, Uruguay

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Most of the screened posters included in this booklet were created on Wed. Jan 4th, 1989, at the Art Strike Propaganda Workshop, as part of the 'Art Strike Mobilization Week' held at Artists Television Access (ATA), San Francisco.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained for \$1 (cash only; outside USA/Canada/Mexico \$2), send to ASAC(CA).

A highly recommended Handbook, of which this booklet is a companion, is: Art Strike: Handbook, edited by Stewart Home, available for £1.95 from ASAC (UK).

Your contributions to further Art Strike publications are welcomed. Updated editions of this booklet will be published during 'the

years without art.'

Please note: when sending for information include a SASE

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**ART STRIKE ACTION  
COMMITTEE (CA)  
PO BOX 170715  
SAN FRANCISCO  
CA 94117  
USA**

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